

BY ORVILLE F. DESJARLAIS JR.

# AN AMERICAN HERO

## BRIG. GEN. PAUL TIBBETS JR., 1915 - 2007

He once said, "I am an Airman, a pilot."

But retired Brig. Gen. Paul W. Tibbets-Jr. was also the Airman who altered the course of world history. The pilot of the B-29 Superfortress "Enola Gay," the first aircraft to drop an atomic bomb, died of natural causes Nov. 1 in Columbus, Ohio, at the age of 92.

"America lost a remarkable Airman ... when retired Brig. Gen. Paul W. Tibbets Jr. passed away," Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. T. Michael Moseley said in a letter to Airmen the same day.

"Today, let us remember the Tibbets legacy — the U.S. Air Force is a better combatant organization because of General Tibbets!" General Moseley said.

General Tibbets joined the Army Air Corps in 1937 and, after earning his wings in February 1938, went to Fort Benning, Ga. There he was the personal pilot and hunting partner of Col. George S. Patton, state Air University historical archives.

He joined the World War II effort and on Aug. 17, 1942, in a bomber named "Butcher Shop," General Tibbets led the first flight of American B-17 Flying Fortress bombers in daylight bombing raids over occupied Europe, striking railroad marshalling yards at Rouen, France.

In November 1942, General Tibbets flew Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower to Gibraltar to direct the allied invasion of North Africa. Then General Tibbets led the initial B-17 bombing raids in North Africa. Later in the war, General Tibbets switched to the B-29 Superfortress and trained a strike force to drop the first atomic bomb at Wendover, Utah. Then the unit, the 509th Composite Wing, deployed to the Pacific Ocean island of Tinian to await their strike orders.

On Aug. 6, 1945, he flew the B-29 "Enola Gay," named after his mother, from Tinian to strike Hiroshima, Japan, on the world's first atomic bombing mission.

The general's grandson, Col. Paul Tibbets IV, commanded a squadron in his grandfather's old unit, now located at

Whiteman Air Force Base, Mo. Today, he is chief of the nuclear, biological and chemical policy branch at NATO Headquarters, Belgium.

He still remembers the day he graduated from pilot training and the breakfast he had with his famous grandfather.

"At my graduation, my grandfather and I had breakfast together, just the two of us," Colonel Tibbets said. "He was never an emotional person, but that day I could see the pride in his eyes. Granddad told me he was proud of me and that I was beginning a

career that served him well, and that he thought I would find very challenging and rewarding."

The colonel said his grandfather rarely gave gifts.

"But that morning he handed me his Rolex watch, which I had admired years earlier and that was given to him by the company (he worked for) in 1967, just a year after I was born," Colonel Tibbets said.

That morning, the colonel said his grandfather also told him "although others would know my name because of him, to always live my own career and not in the shadow of his."

"I took that advice to heart," the colonel said. "It was an easy choice."

Then, in one of the great traditions of Air Force aviators, the colonel broke his

by Master Sgt. Jim Varhegyi



U.S. Air Force Photo



Courtesy Photo

Retired Brig. Gen. Paul W. Tibbets (left) piloted the B-29 Superfortress "Enola Gay" that dropped the first atomic bomb on Japan. The general named his plane (top right) after his mother. In October 1998, the general flew the B-29 "Fifi," with grandson Col. Paul Tibbets IV, at Midland, Texas.

first set of pilot's wings and gave half to his grandfather, "honoring him and the special legacy we shared."

Years after that breakfast, Colonel Tibbets still believes "there is no higher privilege than to serve our great country and defend its freedoms. Freedoms we have, in large part, due to the service and sacrifice of my grandfather and those of his generation," he said.

Many Americans will remember General Tibbets' legacy. Rep. Deborah Pryce of Ohio said General Tibbets lived his life as an exemplary American.

"A patriot, a veteran, a loving husband of more than 50 years and a national hero whose indelible imprint on history should be forever honored and revered," she said.